

I CALL IT, "THE TORMENT
OF EXISTENCE WEIGHED
AGAINST THE HORROR
OF NONBEING."





Mind, Body, & the Failure of Naturalism

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Defining Naturalism

- Only the “natural” exists
 - Natural elements (Mass, energy, etc.)
 - Described by natural relations (Scientific laws)
- Nothing immaterial. There are no...



“The Cosmos is all that is or
was or ever will be.”

-Carl Sagan



Early 2003: My Existential Crisis with Naturalism

- What are the consequences if naturalism is true?
 - No afterlife
 - Heat death of universe
 - Extinction of all values
 - No purpose



Full-Blown Skepticism

- These conclusions are so awful, who would want to believe them?
- Is there an innate motivation for believing in the supernatural?
 - Avoiding angst
 - Wish fulfillment
 - Fear of death
- **How did I come out of this?**

What changed my mind?

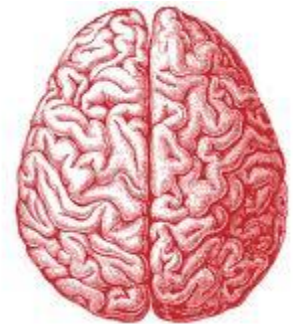
- Creativity
- Beauty



“For like a shaft, clear and cold,
the thought pierced him that in
the end the Shadow was only a
small and passing thing: there
was light and high beauty for
ever beyond its reach.”

If naturalism is true, then what about my mind?

- My “mind” is just the biochemical reactions going in my head
- Is my subjective, first-person conscious experience and sense of self actually real?
 - (Sorry, just a biochemical reaction)
- Is my sense of rational, logical thought and argumentation legitimate?
 - (Sorry, just a biochemical reaction)



Subjective, first-person conscious experience

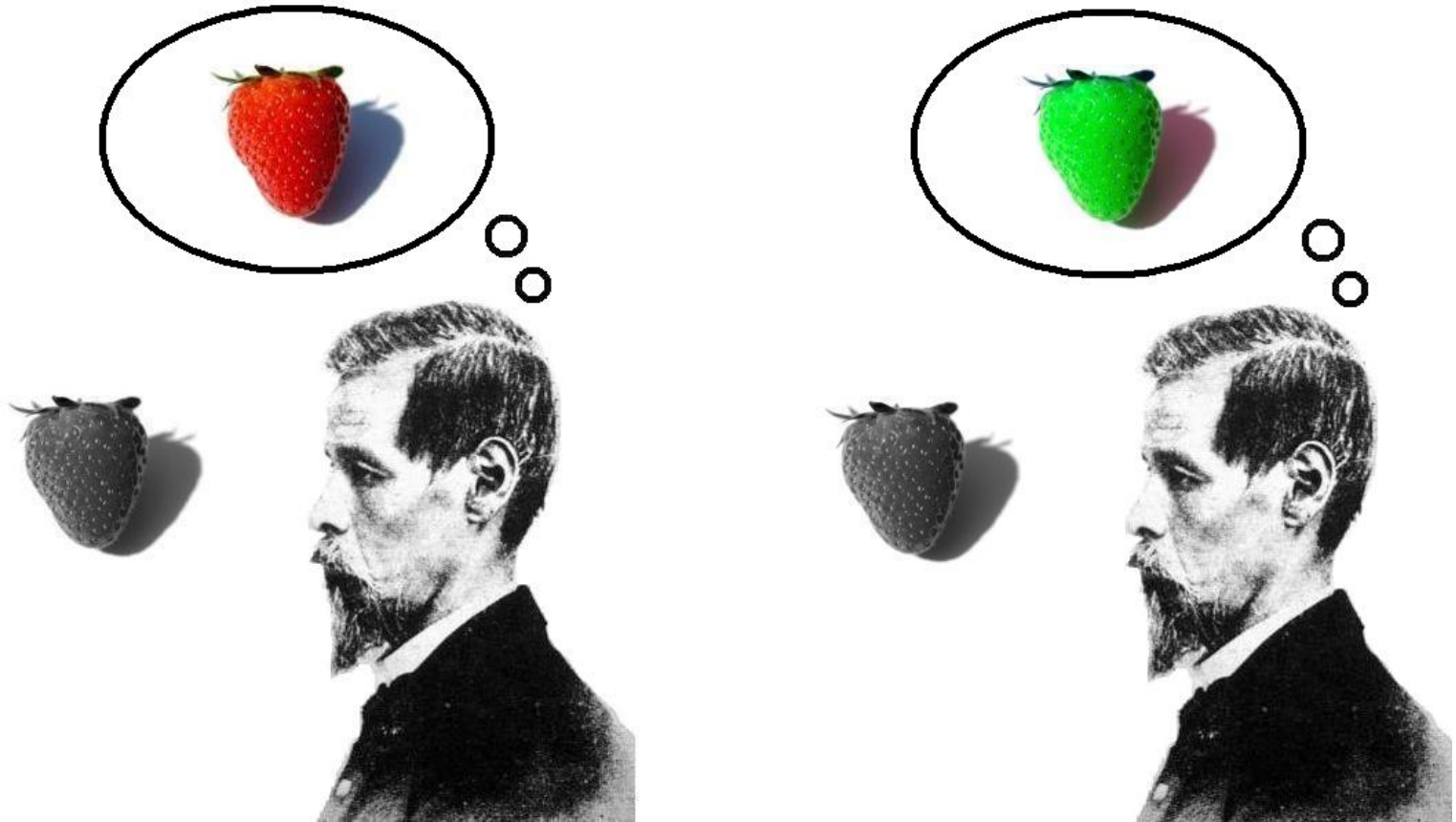
- What does naturalism mean for the existence of conscious, subjective mental states?
- Example:
 - Imagine an bizarrely colored animal
 - Is that real?
 - Is the mental image real?
 - What if the same image were stored on a computer?



The example of subjective pain



The example of qualia



The argument

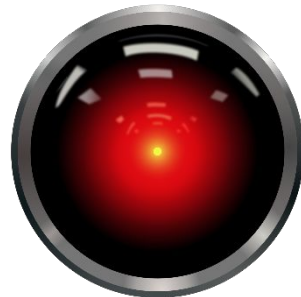
1. Conscious, subjective, mental states exist.
2. If naturalism is true, then physical scientific laws can describe all that exists.
3. Objective scientific studies cannot describe conscious, subjective, mental states.

Therefore naturalism is false.

Naturalists dislike this argument, but they cannot agree on which premise is false.

Is Premise 3 true?

- Premise 3: Objective scientific description cannot describe conscious, subjective, mental states
- Possible responses:
 - “But maybe neuroscience can get better and then we can read people’s minds!”
 - The Artificial Intelligence problem



Mental states vs. brain states

- Beliefs, Ideas, thoughts
 - Can be true or false
 - Beliefs are about something
 - Subjective
 - Belongs to an person's interior mental life
- Biochemistry
 - Cells are in one state or another
 - A collection of cells is what it is; it cannot be true or false
 - Cellular behavior can be fully described by science (objective)

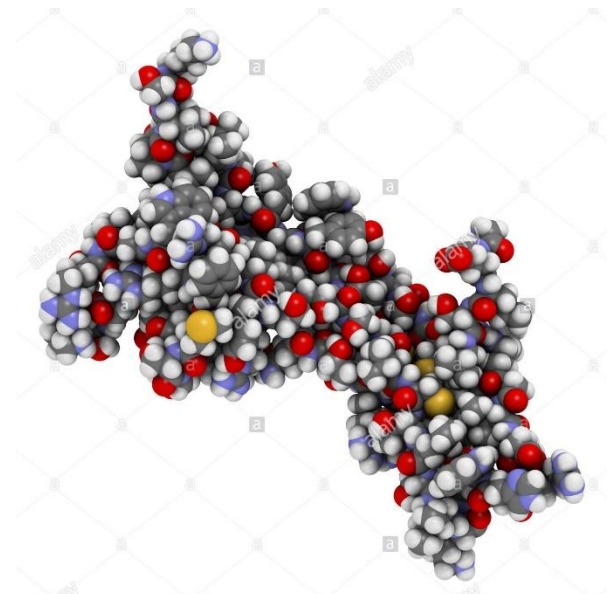
Mental states are not objective

- Is it really fair to argue that we should be able to describe mental states using just chemistry and physics?
- Is it really fair to expect objective science to describe subjective experience?

That's the point: On naturalism, there should be no subjective experiences.

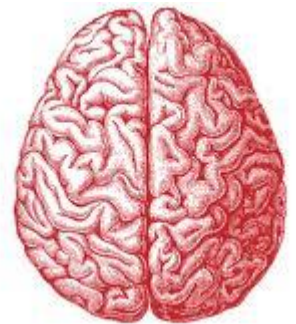
Is Premise 2 true?

- Premise 2: If naturalism is true, then physical scientific laws can describe all that exists.
 - On naturalism, everything can be reduced to atomic (or sub-atomic) interactions.



Do we have to be Reductionist?

- Maybe Premise 2 is false!
- Even if naturalism is true, perhaps consciousness (and rationality) is an **emergent** property that **supervenes** upon the neural network



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Premise 1?

Premise 1: Conscious, subjective, mental states exist.

Does anyone doubt this?



IN MODERATE TO SEVERE RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS (RA)

Get an RA symptom profile
to show your doctor ▶



Prescription Enbrel® (etanercept) is taken by injection.

[Prescribing Information](#) [Medication Guide](#)[Important Safety Information](#)

INDICATION

Moderate to Severe Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)
ENBREL is indicated for reducing signs and symptoms.

The Brain: The Mystery of Consciousness

You exist, right? Prove it. How 100 billion jabbering neurons create the knowledge--or illusion--that you're here

By Steven Pinker | Monday, Jan. 29, 2007



1.3k



97



29

[Read Later](#)

The young woman had survived the car crash, after a fashion. In the five months since parts of her brain had been crushed, she could open her eyes but didn't respond to sights, sounds or jabs. In the jargon of neurology, she was judged to be in a persistent vegetative state. In crueller everyday language, she was a vegetable.

So picture the astonishment of British and Belgian scientists as they scanned her brain using a kind of MRI that detects blood flow to active parts of the brain. When they recited sentences, the parts involved in language lit up. When they asked her to

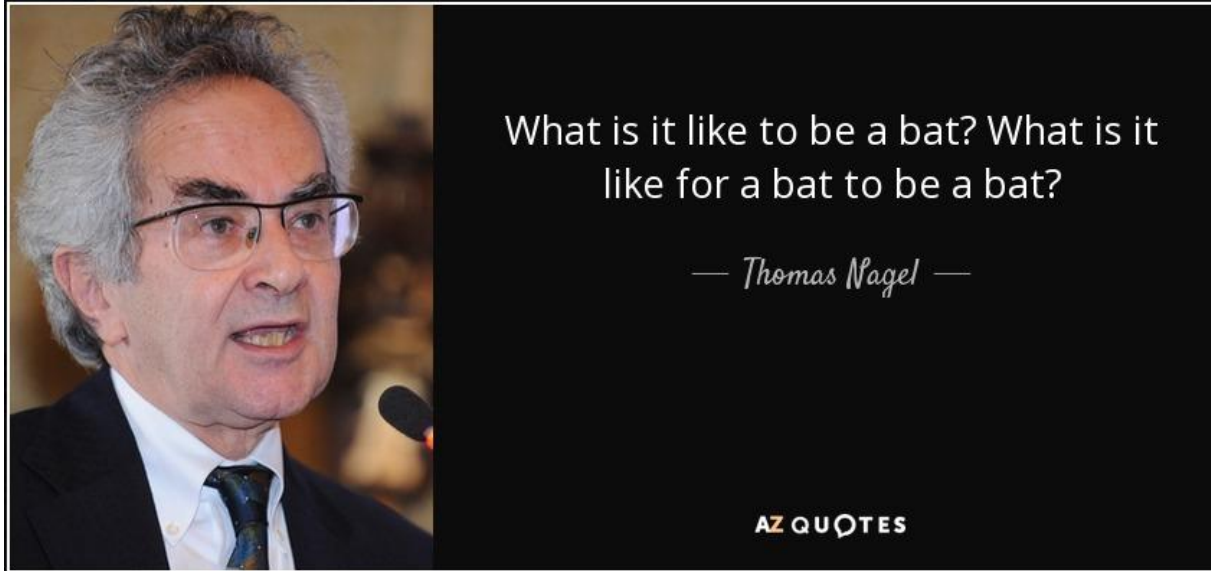


Illustration for TIME by Istvan Orosz



Another night alone for Daniel Dennett.

The curious case of Thomas Nagel



The curious case of Thomas Nagel



The physical sciences can describe organisms like ourselves as parts of the objective spatio-temporal order – our structure and behavior in space and time – but they cannot describe the subjective experiences of such organisms or how the world appears to their different particular points of view. There can be a purely physical description of the neurophysiological processes that give rise to an experience, and also of the physical behavior that is typically associated with it, but such a description, however complete, **will leave out the subjective essence of the experience** – how it is from the point of view of its subject — without which it would not be a conscious experience at all.

So the physical sciences, in spite of their extraordinary success in their own domain, necessarily leave an important aspect of nature unexplained.

Nagel, NYT, Aug 18 2013

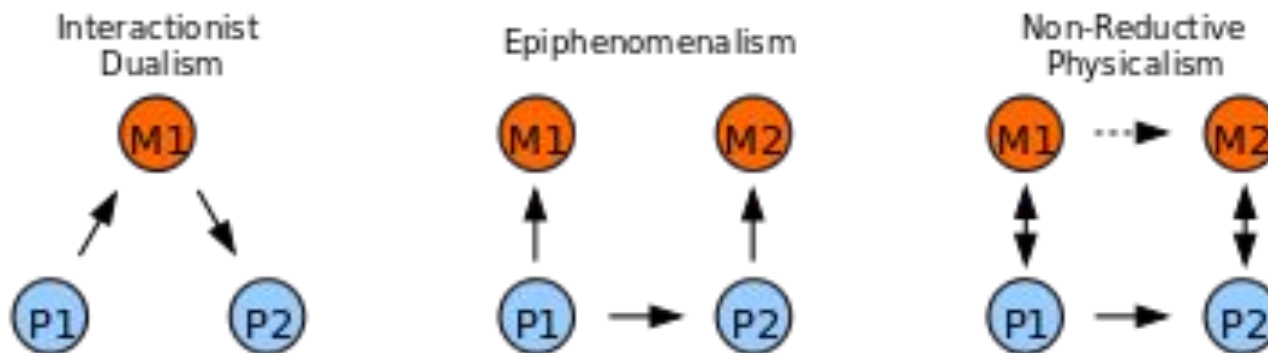
There are two ways of resisting this conclusion, each of which has two versions.

- The first way is to deny that the mental is an irreducible aspect of reality
 - by holding that the mental can be identified with some aspect of the physical, such as patterns of behavior or patterns of neural activity [Denying Premise 3] OR
 - By denying that the mental is part of reality at all, being some kind of illusion [Denying Premise 1]
- The second way is to deny that the mental requires a scientific explanation
 - Because we can regard it as mere fluke or accident, an unexplained extra property of certain physical organisms [Denying Premise 2] OR
 - We can believe that it has an explanation, but one that belongs not to science but to **theology**.

• Nagel, NYT, Aug 18 2013

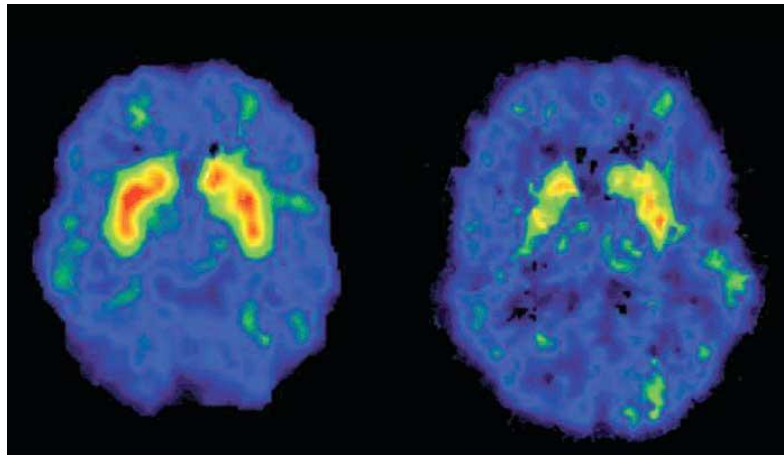
The naturalist rebuttal

- If not naturalism, then what?
- Substance Dualism?
 - Immaterial soul and material brain?
 - Seems to violate Occam's razor.
 - Does one affect the other?
 - Does that violate the laws of physics?
 - Do mental events create energy? Does that violate the laws of thermodynamics?



Brain and mind correlation

- Mental events and physical events in brain seem to be correlated.
 - There are even reports of brain events “preceding” mental decisions.
- Brain damage affects mental experience
 - Lots of dramatic examples of this



HOW AN ATARI CHIP SET OFF A WAR AMONG NEUROSCIENTISTS



What about animals?

- “Souliness” seems to scale with brainpower
- Seems arbitrary to say that a soul is not present for some (ugly) organisms and is present for other (cute) ones.



My take

- You can be a naturalist if you want to, but you have to live with these consequences:
 - There is no “you.” You are not a conscious self with an active mental life.

Remember this the next time you have an existential crisis.

QUESTIONS?

How you answer this question strongly impacts your view of ethics...

- The case of Kevin...



- **1993: Technology does not allow us to see what's wrong with Kevin's brain**
 - **Jail for Kevin**
- **2013: Technology allows us to see what's wrong with Kevin's brain**
 - **No Jail for Kevin**
- **2033: Technology allows us to see what's wrong with every criminal brain**
 - **No Jail for all criminals**

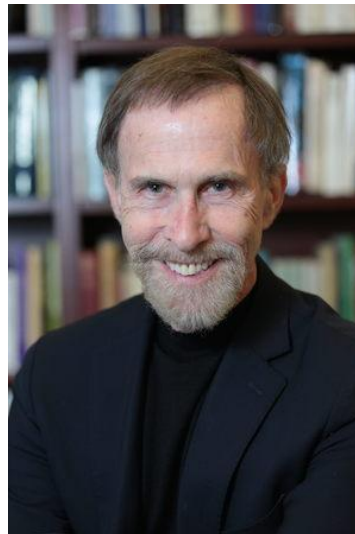
- **1993: Technology does not allow us to see what's wrong with Kevin's brain**
 - **Jail for Kevin**
- **2013: Technology allows us to see what's wrong with Kevin's brain**
 - **No Jail for Kevin**
 - **“Treatment” for Kevin**
- **2033: Technology allows us to see what's wrong with every criminal brain**
 - **No Jail for all criminals**
 - **“Treatment” for all criminals**
- **2034: Technology allows us to see what's wrong with every brain**
 - **“Treatment” for all with criminal-looking brain**

Appendix

We never have direct access to our thoughts. As Peter Carruthers first argued, self-consciousness is just mind reading turned inward... There is no first-person point of view.

Our access to our own thoughts is just as indirect and fallible as our access to the thoughts of other people. **We have no privileged access to our own minds.** If our thoughts give the real meaning of our actions, our words, our lives, then we can't ever be sure what we say or do, or for that matter, what we think or why we think it.

Alex Rosenberg
Professor of Philosophy
Duke University



I am drawn instead to a naturalistic, though non-materialist, alternative. Mind, I suspect, is not an inexplicable accident or a divine and anomalous gift, but basic aspect of nature that we will not understand until we transcend the built-in limits of contemporary scientific orthodoxy.



notes

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PU7LtHs3sc>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/18/opinion/why-you-dont-know-your-own-mind.html>